≡ MENU

OtherHand

The craziest day hike, ever!

By the time the news of non-progress had come out in early March, I was becoming quite frustrated. I really wanted closure to this case so I could move on to other interesting things. But as long as there remained loose ends, I felt my mind constantly being pulled back to the puzzle.

So on March 23, I found myself back at the site, all by myself….on a day hike. It didn't start out to be that way, but that's how it ended up.

I had found the hike in via Anvil Canyon and Squaw Spring to be a pretty awful experience and had been interested in finding an alternative route. There's an old, blocked off road that runs southerly from Barker Ranch to Wingate Wash that caught my eye. There's also a saddle southerly of Needle Peak that provides a (relative) low point to head east from this old road into the upper alluvial plain where the Germans were found. Finally, between the road and the saddle there's an obscure spring (SPSO 06), which might be able to provide water.

Looking south down the road to Wingate Wash (T. Mahood)

My plan was to get out of the house by 4:30 AM and drive via Trona and Ballarat to Barker Ranch and do a day hike from Barker Ranch to the spring to check out the water situation. If there was water, I brought along a lot of empty 2 liter bottles to fill for a water cache placed either at the saddle, or below it on the easterly side, towards the Germans for future trips. All the while I was planning on checking the route for viability. I tried not to dwell on how ugly the trip could become if I had to haul a couple of gallons of water up an unknown canyon.

By 8:30 AM I had reached Barker Ranch, the starting point. It was my first time here and was suitably creepy, especially solo. I knew the Meyers Ranch was adjacent, and sitting on the road I wanted to take in. I also knew that Meyers Ranch was still private property, and I wished to avoid trespassing. I was able to find the property boundaries on a BLM land use website and plotted a course around it, skirting the property to the north, then dropping back to rejoin the road once east of Meyers Ranch. It was a little bit of a pain, but worked OK. It wasn't until well after I did that route that I found out this was the area Manson and his buddies buried some as-yet-undiscovered bodies. Glad I didn't know that at the time.

I made good time and reached the spring about 11 AM. It turned out the spring was pretty poor. Very low flow, and I'd expect it to be at a maximum that time of year, so it would only be getting worse. But I was able to pump about two liters which I viewed as a reserve I could carry for the day. This gave me some options I was weighing in my mind.

The mighty SPSO 06 spring! (T. Mahood)

Leaving the spring I headed east and upward to the saddle to check out the route. It was really, really bad. Fortunately I wasn't loaded down with a lot of water, so I reached the saddle just after Noon. Looking at my GPS showed the Germans site was "only" 2 miles away to the southeast (in a non-possible straight line, of course). Given I had a relatively light day pack with extra water, I figured I had just enough time to make the site, spend no more than an hour there, and get back to Barker Ranch by dark. So off I went. Kids, don't try this at home.

At saddle, looking east to alluvial plain, Sugarloaf at right edge of image (T. Mahood)

Approaching site (T. Mahood)

Since I was approaching the site from a somewhat different direction, I began searching as I approached, but found nothing new. I was interested in how good a job the Sheriff's staff did in retrieving items on December 29th, and it was really very good. There wasn't a sign of bones anywhere, and almost no evidence of any sort of visitation. There were just a few bits of surveyor tape flagging in some brush, but there wasn't anything obvious there. I did notice that all the new spring growth now present made it very difficult to see around the

base of shrubs.

I was getting close to my “must leave” time and starting to pack up near the area the wallet was found when I saw a glint on the ground. It was a pair of Bausch & Lomb “Killer Loop” sunglasses, somewhat crushed and with the lenses missing. They were VERY hard to see. In fact, when I went to my pack and returned with my camera and measure, I had trouble finding it again. I thought about bringing them back, but figured it best to flag the spot and leave the glasses in place to be retrieved by some future official search team.

Again, I finished that and was preparing to leave, when about 10 feet away I saw a couple of cards in the dirt. They were “smart cards” for a German health insurance plan, one with Cornelia’s name and the other with Max’s name. As I took more pictures I was really having second thoughts about leaving this stuff, as I was flagging it very visibly. And I wasn’t certain if there would be a team back on site anytime soon. But I flagged a rock and prepared to leave it.

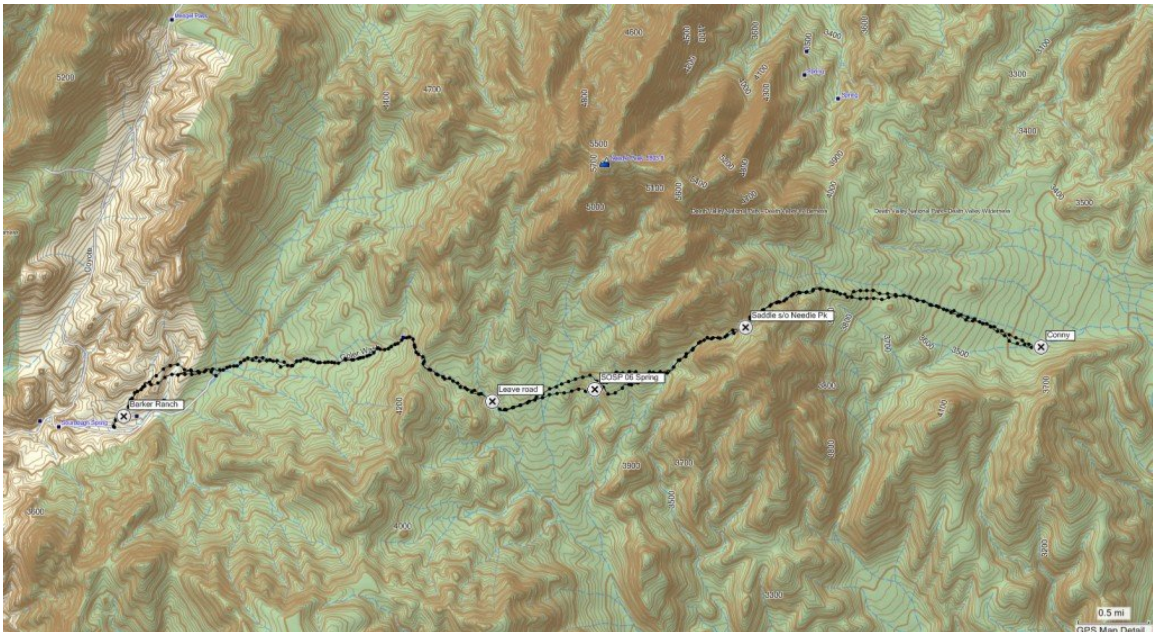
Finally, I was past my departure time and had my pack on. As I bent over to pick up one of my hiking poles, there was a glint on the ground right under my nose. It was a set of keys. My first thought was that they might be the van keys, but on closer inspection they looked more like European house keys.

Now I was really in a quandary. There were now some significant items accumulated here. I literally paced around for 5 or 10 minutes trying to decide whether to leave it all or take it in to the Inyo Sheriff. Given that I had marked things really well, they would be wonderful souvenirs should anyone else manage to find the area. On the other hand, it was evidence in a case under investigation and should really be handled by professionals. I finally made a judgment call and decided that if any other hiker had found the stuff they would have picked it up, carted it out and given it to a ranger. This way the Sheriff would at least have context photos showing the items in place and know that they were handled with care. So the items were carefully wrapped in my jacket and stowed in my pack.

Being that far out there solo, even with good gear, plenty of water and a Personal Locater Beacon, is still a sphincter-tightening experience. It feels like being on the far side of the Moon. And always in the back of my mind is the knowledge that if something goes wrong out here, the consequences could be considerable. I was in the middle of a harsh reminder

of that. So I was quite happy to leave. I made it back to my truck a bit after 6 PM, managed to get out of Goler Wash before dark and home around 10:30 PM. It was one long day!

The hiking round trip was 17 miles, with most of it cross country travel. Not something I'd recommend highly. I don't think the route I used is especially useful. While it may be shorter, there are significant altitude gains and losses. Besides, it really, really sucks. The route in via Anvil Canyon and Squaw Spring simply just sucks, so it's preferable.



GPS tracks for Barker Ranch Route - 3/23/2010 (T. Mahood)

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